

Nurses Take a Seat at the Boardroom Table



Board membership gave Debra A. Toney a way to enact change. Now she's helping other nurses do it, too.

In order to be effective in a clinical or hospital setting, nurses must work within and across systems. The training they receive, along with the teamwork their jobs require, makes them prime candidates for board membership.

That's what Debra A. Toney, PhD, RN, FAAN, learned over the course of 40 years in nursing and board and association membership, including serving as the first chair of the Office of Minority Health for the State of Nevada, president of the National Black Nurses Association (NBNA), and president of the National Coalition of Ethnic and Minority Nurse Associations. Now nurses seek her out for mentoring: she helps get them on a path to leadership as a way to enact change in communities.

"As a nurse, one of the most important things you can do is get a seat at the table," Debra says. "And then speak your truth."

Learning to lead

Debra's journey to leadership started when she became involved with professional associations. When she attended NBNA conferences and listened to nurse leaders speak at various sessions she was impressed by their communication style and the way they presented their knowledge. They became her role models.

"As I progressed in my career, I learned that there's an entire process to leadership and to board membership," she says. "But what became apparent right away is that if you're not part of leadership you're often following rules set by others and your voice is not heard about what works best for the health of a community."

Eventually, Debra founded the Southern Nevada Black Nurses Association. "I saw that nurses in my area needed to step up and get involved at a national level," she says. "And when you put forth a good idea, people often point at you and say, 'Why don't you do it?'" Today, the association works to influence legislation and policies that affect health care consumers and to increase knowledge about the health needs of Black Americans.

As her involvement with associations at a local and national level grew, Debra decided to increase her level of education as a way to become a more effective leader and to ensure that her qualifications matched what organizations needed.

“In the beginning, I could offer what I’d gained through clinical experience, but I wanted to bring more,” she explained. “I needed to understand finance. I wanted to be a better writer and be able to get up and speak in front of an audience and engage them with a well thought-out message.”

To help meet these goals, she decided to pursue a PhD in human services with a specialization in health care administration at Capella University.

Looking back at her Capella experience, Debra says one of the most positive aspects was the guidance she received from her mentor and dissertation chair. “She was a nurse herself,” she says. “I saw the things she was involved in and felt inspired. With her guidance, I came to see that bigger things were possible for me. I thought, ‘OK, this is for real.’”



Reaching new horizons

After years of membership and serving in roles of increasing responsibility within the NBNA, Debra was elected to serve as president of that organization. This high-visibility role led to additional opportunities, including more board, association, and advisory positions.

“Once I took on some of these leadership roles, more offers came to me,” Debra says. “When I was NBNA president, I was asked to serve on an advisory board for The Coca-Cola Company. They were working to address the growing concern of obesity in our country and experimenting with how to successfully respond to that. They wanted my perspective and input for how to help meet new guidelines. One result of our work was Coca-Cola offering their product in eight-ounce cans, which is a more appropriate serving size. And as a result of my participation on that committee, I had the chance to be a torchbearer for the 2012 Olympic Games in London, an experience I will always remember. Each opportunity continued to flow into the next opportunity.”

To enhance her leadership acumen, Debra became a Robert Wood Johnson Executive Nurse Fellow. The financial award from the fellowship allowed her to start a leadership institute and a children’s institute at the NBNA conference; both remain vital parts of the organization today.

Currently, she serves as president for the National Coalition of Ethnic Minority Nurse Associations and devotes time to coaching five mentees who want to rise into leadership positions. “I see them as being where I was when I was starting out,” she says. “It’s time for me to reach back and pull up the next generation.” While empowering others to reach their professional goals is a top priority for Debra, she continues to identify and work towards opportunities for her own growth. “My next goal is to serve on a Fortune 500 corporate board.”

Nurses play a pivotal role

Nurses have a wide range of skills that translate to the boardroom.

“Often nurses go to work and take care of patients all day long and that in itself is a big job,” Debra says. “But as a result of doing that job every day, nurses have so much insight. For example, I hear story after story of nurses not being included in health system operations that impact them yet they did not have a voice in the decision-making process. Sometimes that lack of nursing input results in less than optimal outcomes. I believe that better decisions relating to nursing practice and other clinical operations would occur if nurses were consulted.”

Debra says nurse leadership can be fostered early by teaching nurses to recognize their value within systems and communities and by encouraging them to speak up. “I’m currently vice president of quality management at Nevada Health Centers,” she says. “As a staff member, I attend board meetings so that I’m contributing from a quality of care perspective. Nurses must get involved and advocate for the needs of their patients.”



Identifying opportunities to serve

When working with her mentees, Debra asks them what are they passionate about, why do they want to be on a board, and what they have to offer. She also tells them not to limit themselves to commenting only on health-related issues and to truly be an advocate for what they believe in.

“Sometimes people may not see right away what nurses bring to the table,” she says. “Some nurses are CEOs of hospitals, which means they have a business background. My PhD was in human services with a specialization in health care administration, so I’m well-versed in policy and operations of health systems. Some nurses will gravitate to a position that’s focused on clinical practice, but others may want something that’s more research, academic or focused on health policy.”

Her second piece of advice is to choose a board or association that matches your passion and welcomes your perspective and skills. This begins with doing research on a board that interests you. Debra advises nurses to find out who is on the board and to consider its diversity, mission, and reputation.

“That board’s reputation becomes your reputation,” she says. “Does their mission match up with your mission? Find a board that meets your passion and then find out what your specific function as a member would be and how you can help accomplish the mission.”

Debra stresses that board membership requires a serious time commitment, along with the ability to fundraise and to understand legal issues. But she believes the time and energy required to be a successful board member are well worth the effort. “I’ve had a great career. Through associations and boards I’ve met renowned nurses and I’ve built an incredible network. I’ve traveled to Africa and London and I was able to be at the White House for the signing of the Children’s Health Insurance Program bill during President Obama’s administration.”

Her final piece of advice for nurses who are ready to join a board is to just be themselves. “I find that’s often what boards want the most,” she says. “They want your unique perspective and to know you are doing what is best to accomplish the mission of the organization.”